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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses from a historical perspective past shortcomings of public service television with its protective information policies, indifference to audiovisual language, absence of diversity in journalistic thematic choices, and "boring" style of television reporting. It is argued that there has been a substantial lack of concern in communication relationships with the public being served, and that partisans of public service broadcasting should start elaborating a more audience-needs oriented concept of public service information, rather than moralistically condemning perverse effects of commercial television. In addition, it is recommended that traditional broadcasting journalism criteria be scrutinized, and that those doing broadcast journalism research adopt new criteria of credibility, diversity, and audiovisual investigative creativity. It is also suggested that researchers introduce an unusual parameter--quantitative and qualitative public reactions--when dealing with such basic topics as success or failure of information programs and policies. (12 notes/references) (CGD)

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PUBLIC SERVICE OR EDUCATIONAL TELEVISION?

Information policies in a competitive broadcasting system

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"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
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Tuesday afternoon, April 15th 1986 was undoubtedly one of the worse moments for the defenders of Italian television information monopoly. The famous Italian journalist and anchor-man Enzo Biagi was just back from Tripoli with an exclusive interview with Mr. Kaddafi - shot a few hours before the American attack on Libia - when he was informed that his interview could not be broadcast on his weekly Current Affairs program. The RAI direction thought that showing Kaddafi on television could provoke fears, emotional reactions and unchain tensions in the country. Italian Broadcasting had in its hands, that afternoon, one of the most important scoops of its history, but its management preferred to protect the citizens' sensibility, and not expose them to dangerous propaganda.

Media responsibility in information policies is a very ancient problem and not an easy one to handle. The new fact is that the future arrival of aggressive commercial television in news coverage can seriously undermine Public Service's already disputed credibility. As a matter of fact the way in which this doctrine has been applied or utilized in the last few years by many state broadcasting organisations has raised polemics, criticisms and dissatisfaction.

And unfortunately this is not the only problem that these institutions have now to face. Information dissemination is still, after 30 years, practically limited to the news-magazine model, a very marginal phenomenon in the whole publishing industry. However television reporting has been diluted into a pseudo-sociological activity and has

abandoned that "authorship" philosophy which made some investigative journalism of the '60's so popular.

As you will see, the increasing commercialisation of the European broadcasting system is nowadays weakening not just Public Service Institutions but the very elitist and pedagogical practice of this notion which developed during the seventies. The information policy of the last decade is a privileged observatory to follow this shift, understand the present crisis and elaborate new criteria for broadcasting journalism research.

1. From objectivity to credibility

One of the main characteristics of recent debate on Italian or French broadcasting journalism is the constant reference to American networks; described as the Mecca of professional information freedom. And the most curious fact is that this unconditional praise comes not only from famous newspaper columnists, raised in a competitive system and familiar with the market rules, but also from state-run television officials.

In 1980, for example, Mr. Andreo Barbato, director at that time of the RAI's 2nd channel News Department, devoted a whole article defending CBS newsmen's political autonomy. He argued that their reports played a crucial role in historical moments like McCarthyism, the Vietnam war and Watergate scandal, and concludes:

> "Even within the limits of a 'medium consensus', the corporation has always granted them a large autonomy, protecting them from political pressures... In countries where it is obligatory to drop a curtsey to Giscard d'Estaing (former French President) or Cossiga (former Italian Prime Minister), all this is still unthinkable. But not for much longer." (L'ESPRESSO, 23.3.1980)

We don't know if Mr. Barbato was fired a few months later because of this public justification for commercial television freedom. We only know that his successor, Mr. Zatterin, still continues five years later to "reveal" to the press the existence of "structural constraints":

> "I produce an old and unsightly journal. But this is the only one I'm allowed to produce, given RAI's organisational structure and present internal situation". (PANORAMA, 3.2.1985)

Beyond the Alps, in France, the arrival of commercial television is much more recent than in Italy, but complaints about Public Service information don't sound very different. Patrick Poivre d'Arvor, one of the most famous primetime news anchormen, looks at the new situation as an exciting evolution:

> "The first advantage of future commercial networks should be to deliver News Directors from any suspicion of obedience to politicians...I think that this positive novelty will rebound onto Public Service, contributing to the disappearance of its indifference and prudence...Commercial television should introduce a new right: the right to be courageous." (L'EVENEMENT DU JEUDI, 14.9.1985)

Naturally, not all broadcasters share the French journalist's optimism, claiming that economic pressures differ from political ones in nature only, but not in degree. And they are probably right. Even if in Great Britain, where broadcast information competition has existed for more than 30 years, many observers - according to Peter H. Foges - regard ITN news as "more inspired" than BBC news(1).

But this kind of discussion risks remaining abstract because of radical differences in cultural habits and media organisation between Italy and Great Britain or France and USA. Moreover, nobody knows yet what French or Italian commercial information programmes will be like.

The only clear thing is that the seventies' confidence in reforming and revitalizing most of the European Public Services Institutions seems to be completely lost. More and more often journalists or producers look at recent changes in the broadcast landscape as a salutary occasion to discharge ancient frustrations: "Imagine that we (French television) have been obliged to wait for the Auckland trial of the Turenge couple before showing our own shots of the Rainbow-Warrior shipwreck!" burst out Mr. Poivre d'Arvor again.

A second important fact is that the eighties' intolerance against state interference looks quite different from the seventies' criticism of news bias. When state television broadcasters look benevolently upon commercial networks, they don't delude themselves about the possibility of finding a pure ideological freedom: they are only looking for an honest professional acknowledgement. They want to show images, present controversial facts or leaders: they want to expose people to contradictory realities. Their principal wish is to be responsible not only toward the state but also toward their audiences. "Why" - asks the Italian journalist Enzo Biagi the day after RAI's censorship of his Kaddafi interview - "can Ted Koppel (ABC), in the most critical moment of the Libyan crisis, establish a link with the

colonel in Tripoli, and we can't? Even during the Vietnam war " - insists the journalist - "American networks flew to Hanoi to interview Ho Chi Minh"(2).

Last decade's broadcasting journalism criticism was quite different. Television News production was mostly evaluated according to its political orientation: and content analysis studies flowered everywhere in order to exercise this kind of ideological control. Last decade's key-word was objectivity. News should above all be impartial, two-sided, balanced and respectful of differences in "opinion".

The limit to this way of discussing journalistic standards was the conception of information only as an ineluctably biased activity, a "purposive behavior" which would however advantage a party, a minority group or a village association. Obviously, this is not a false approach: this is only a simplified conceptual pattern. As a matter of fact, there are still some facts in life - not many, I agree - that just "happen" without an original political value, and the ontological dilemma of showing or not showing them is often an institutional problem and not an ideological one. More and more controversial cases deal, at present, not with the journalist's objectivity any more, but with his responsibility towards State security or the credibility of Justice.

One of the best examples of this shift in information criteria evaluation comes, once again, from a recent Italian polemic on RAI's behavior. Last April 1st, the restless Biagi's program SPOT announced a "surprise report": but Italian judges didn't

appreciate the TV show and the day after, proceeded to the incrimination of the journalist with his informers. During the program, Biagi showed to seven million Italians the content of the brief-case which belonged to Roberto CALVI - the banker involved in the Vatican financial scandal - found hanged under a bridge in London. Since then, the brief-case had disappeared and Italian judges would have preferred to recover it before the journalist did.

The most interesting point in this story is not located in the justice reaction, but in the ontological debate that this report raised. Probably $30,000 was paid for the scoop, with RAI's consistent participation, and to the socialist press this looked like an "inadmissible journalistic procedure" for a state television. "Journalists who express themselves with private means can do what they like - claims the newspaper editor-in-chief - the discourse changes when they are entrusted with resources from state television" (3).

Two points emerge clearly from this polemic. First of all, the contraversial point concerning the journalistic attitude now deals with the institutional boundaries of newsgathering instead of possible ideological bias. He is not accused of partisan behaviour. Secondly, some observers seem to consider Public Service information as an originally "limited" one, a responsible activity not allowed to investigate as far as their colleagues.

In summary, the anticipated arrival in France and Italy of commercial television information is pushing journalistic debate

towards a neglected dimension: the ontological dilemma between state vs. public interests' defence, between the duty to protect institutional credibility and the right to let people know embarrassing truths.

Researchers should pay more attention to this neglected issue because audiences will evaluate the next Public Service performances with such very simple and intuitive criteria.

2. The Macabre Obsession

Information credibility is not the only problem that Public Service institutions will have to cope with in the next few years, but also diversification in journalistic content and editorial format.

In 1974, Raymond Williams had already noticed that a "mass" medium like television presents a strange anomaly: the total absence of popular journalistic products commonly found in the printed press and publications:

> "The world-view indicated by the selection and relative priority of news items is very similar as between broadcast bulletins and those minority newspapers which are written by and for the relatively highly educated. The distribution of interests in the more popular press, which supposedly follows the interests of its characteristic readers, is hardly to be found anywhere in broadcast news, although very similar definitions of what is popular and interesting tend to predominate in the non-news programming"(4).

Our recent research on the evolution of Italian TV magazines (5) not only corroborates Williams' evidence, but shows that broadcast

thematic choices are even more elitist than minority newspapers. Only a French newspaper like LE MONDE still devotes - as television does - 30% of its content to the coverage of foreign countries' political transitions. This policy was probably quite excusable at the dawn of broadcasting reporting when television journalists attracted by the medium specificity privileged culturally distant events. But the perseverance of this approach even when RAI's information offer increased after the 1976 reform, to an average of four programs a week, transformed this cultural and political curiousity into a macabre obsession. The result was that after 1976, RAI 1 and RAI 2, for example, broadcast an average of 55 documentaries a year on Latin American guerrillas or Middle East conflicts.

On the other hand, coverage of Italian life-style transformations, analysis of show-biz, fashion or the sports world has always been abundantly neglected. They have been marginal issues mostly utilized to balance hard news, to unburden a top-heavy editorial menu. This is a very astonishing phenomenon for a country in which four sports newspapers are published every day and where SORRISI E CANZONI TV, a weekly TV and movie magazine, has the biggest circulation in the country (2-500.000 copies). Even VARIETY has devoted three cover stories to this editorial success whose sales income is superior to that earned by advertising.

But the most paradoxical case is perhaps represented by the RAI's coverage of the fashion world: a publishing market of six weekly specialized magazines and several luxurious monthly publications. In spite of the fact that Italy's image is almost identified with

fashion or design creativity and that RAI's information offer is, by now, over 200 reports a year (except news), in the whole of 1983 only one 20' film was presented about Putignano, a Southern Italian village specialising in wedding dresses!

And also when these non-political topics are covered, this happens because political events have drawn the journalists' attention: cinema exhibition crisis, movie-actors' strikes or the clothing industry's low wages. In short, popular or glamour issues don't seem to be worthy of aesthetic, cultural or economic analysis: their coverage swings between the curiousity approach or the political recovery.

Without considering the very personal importance that each of us may attribute to "politics" or "entertainment", "social problems" or "sport", Italian Public Service information looks objectively like a very stereotyped offer, an editorial policy which has a low degree of diversification. And the most amazing point is that this thematic structure has remained unchanged for 20 years: even after 1976 when, as we mentioned above, the number of the weekly magazine programmes doubled. Here again, "Public Service", according to the dominant seventies' philosophy, meant just the guarantee of ideological pluralism. A greater number of current affairs programs should provide a wider spectrum of "opinions" and "interpretations", not of issues. But the reality that had to be "pluralistically" analysed remained the news reality. Professional diversification in news definition, editorial formula or, as we will see, audiovisual language were practically neglected.

One of the main reasons for this very elitist attitude of Italian broadcasting journalism can certainly be found in the fact that the current affairs or documentary departments rarely existed on their own: their production was mostly assured by a unique News Division structure. TV7, certainly the most successful TV magazine, was presented as a "news supplement" when it was created in 1963. This explains why so many TV magazines have adopted such a uniformal journalistic conception. Nor has the weekly format favoured the coverage of less newsy subjects, which are normally confined to late-night cultural programs.

But thematic standardisation is not the only consequence of the historical unification of news and current affairs departments.

3. The Two Souls of Broadcast Journalism

On the thirtieth anniversary of its birth (1985), L'ESPRESSO, an authoritative Italian news-magazine, launched an advertising campaign founded on this slogan "Cattivo come sempre, bello come non mai" (..."Ruthless as always, beautiful as ever").

What struck us in this image-campaign is the use of aesthetic parameters to promote a journalistic product which became synonymous of courageous investigative reporting. The printed news-magazine promises to introduce new "glamour" standards and conjugate them with its proverbial "watch-dog" journalism. And this seems to be a generally shared policy within the printed press engaged in a slow visualisation process in order to compete with audiovisual media.

If we can now look at the evolution of Italian broadcast journalism, we can't avoid remarking that these aesthetic and visual parameters characterise only its very early production and they progressively disappeared during the seventies and eighties. In a paradoxically inverted movement as regards the printed press, broadcast journalism has imitated more and more those influential and elitist national papers which are now abandoning or diluting their "news approach" in a more popular conception. Developing, broadcast journalism renounced its audiovisual origin and specificity.

In the sixties, for example, current affairs and documentaries departments often played the role of a professional springboard for currently celebrated directors such as Gregoretti and Comencini in Italy or Goretta and Tanner in Switzerland. Film makers and directors participated in broadcasting production teams and documentary represented a new means of expression which allowed them to enlarge their range in the communication of social experiences. If we now look at those films, we are struck by how many fiction movie devices were utilized in conceiving television reports.

Cohabitation between newsmen and directors has never been an easy affair, because of their differences in personal background, career structures and professional conception of broadcast journalism. Some observers have already noticed that film makers' main characteristics are their predeliction for "personal films on non-newsy subjects" (6) and their passionate belief in "cinematic methods as the only true vehicle for television journalism" (7).

They like to exploit film in all its variety of imagery and sound, to evoke and not just to tell. In opposition to newsmen, they are skeptical of official sources, preferring the man-in-the-street view of society. They value, above all, the ability to tell a good story.

The historical confrontation between these two groups of broadcasting journalists is general: we can find it in most of the European television corporations. But Italian state television has practically solved this endless conflict by simply eliminating film makers' contribution to current affairs production. As we have already seen, the News Departments of the RAI's two main channels have progressively incorporated all the various TV magazines' teams in their organisational structure. So far, the information offer has been homogeneized, not only in content, but also in audiovisual language, style and investigative methodology. Television journalism became more and more journalism and less and less television.

4. The Analysis Journalism Era

However, organisational policies have been facilitated by the arrival, at the beginning of the seventies, of a new professional culture: a conception of broadcasting journalism, which openly condemned the sixties' documentary approach with its "cinematic methods".

In 1975, for example, two famous British broadcast journalists - John Birt and Peter Jay - raised a passionate debate on what they

called "bias against understanding" or the intrinsic limits of television reporting (8). The main one - according to the authors - is its dependence on the reportage philosophy that is to say the temptation to privelege certain "microcosms", like a Belfast protestant family, when covering a complex reality such as the Northern Ireland conflict. Television journalism, like a magnifying glass, ends up by focusing just on details, superficial phenomena, leaving aside the political and economic context.

This criticism was certainly in accordance with "l'esprit du temps" because in France and Italy we find, during the same period, the same kind of public confession. Showing live riots and conflicts, gathering true and involved testimonies, penetrating into places or institutions where most of the viewers had certainly never been, all this - usually considered as a strength of the television in regard to the press - was suddenly perceived as a weakness. The thousands of films shot all around the world became pieces of non-sense because they just displayed mere facts, they didn't allow understanding of why they happened and what consequences they might have. Television journalism, prisoner of its audiovisual specificity, would be obliged to transform every political or social event into a parade of anecdotes, confessions and dramas.

This sincere criticism which came - and that is important - from inside the profession, gained a large audience and probably contributed to the birth of what Brusini and James today call the "analysis journalism era" (9): a journalism which refers to a very specific idea of information. Scientific research evidences and

statistical trends are the main sources as they permit preparation of an accurate dossier. Graphic computers and new technologies become much more important than TV cameras for their capacity of showing "invisible" phenomena such as money market fluctuations. And studio debates are considered as the best formula to handle abstract issues.

Now, we would like to point out that this way of conceiving journalism, despite its laudable intentions, ends up emphasizing the pedagogical dimension of the profession and minimizes the investigative one: that enquiry soul of journalism which finds its origins in legal processes or the Perry Mason myth. However, this recent professional shift completely underestimates - in our opinion - film techniques contribution to the improvement of knowledge and communication.

From a cognitive point of view the main weakness of analysis journalism resides in the fact that its doesn't produce fresh, illuminating data on controversial events. It often limits itself to processing knowledge elaborated outside the profession. It finally risks reducing television journalism into a mere competence in language articulation or mass appeal. We lose here one of the main functions of audiovisual information which consists in exposing - much more persuasively than the print press - new audiences to concrete evidences that don't necessarily confirm their deep-rooted ideological attitudes. Briefly, recent broadcasting journalism,trying to avoid the simple description of bare facts - or the "bang-bang-approach" - became more and more inclined to rely on experts' explanations: forgetting that

experts' knowledge has been elaborated independently from the events reporters are now covering. As Jean Daniel - editor in chief of the French news magazine NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR - brightly noticed, news criticism and newsmen often underestimate "the part of mystery that reality holds in itself when it arises for the first time, as new data...journalism is a profession in which to be sincere is much more important than not to contradict oneself" (10).

Also there is a limit to the competence of analysis journalism because of its implicit pedagogical attitude. Explaining causes and consequences implies ignorance to be remedied and resorting to sophisticated computerized techniques or persuasive performers only underlines its educational aim(11).

Investigative audiovisual journalism, on the contrary, has a completely different conception of the relationship with its audience. It doesn't assume a passive and un-educated receiver but an active and curious observer. Film makers want to attract their audiences by involving them, all through the program, through their research procedures. They offer to the public fulfillment with the development of a personal hypothesis and the gratification of reading, interpreting audiovisual data, interaction, meaningful patterns or interesting discourse behaviour. The success of their work is based on that cognitive and aesthetic tension that characterizes every author's approach and not simply journalistic jousting.

But the present development of analysis journalism and its

professional culture - that we just described - has deeper roots. Roots which can be appreciated only if we look at the historical relations between journalism and social sciences. If, during the seventies, an opposition was made possible between "image" and "comprehension" this is because a consistant intellectual movement - both inside and outside the profession - gave to the latter a purely disciplinary meaning. This happened only because one persisted in referring to sociological or psychological dominant theories as the only means of avoiding superficiality.

Now, the case is that in the social sciences European tradition "society" studies are almost synonymous with political and institutional studies. Direct analysis of real everyday life behaviour through participant observation, in-depth interviewing, case studies and even laboratory experiences have never benefitted from a great prestige. Given this theoretical situation, we can easily understand why audiovisual journalists, even if inclined to privilege qualitative approaches, preferred in any case not to weaken their reputation by persisting in unorthodox methodological adventures.

In conclusion, we think that the strong criticism of the seventies against broadcasting journalism lack of explanations favoured the present renunciation of the more factual and investigative dimension of the journalistic profession. Developing the "analysis model" journalists elaborated in practice protective routines which allowed them to ward off intellectual attacks and, at the same time, not irritate political and institutional sensitivities. Professionals themselves admit that broadcast

journalists have lost, or never acquired, the competence of making enquiries: as a matter of fact "passing from print press to the audiovisual one is quite a normal career, but the contrary is very rare"(12).

4. Conclusions

The main aim of this paper has been to prove that partisans of Public Service Broadcasting should first start by admitting some historical misunderstanding of these institutions by mass communications scholars. We must begin by recognizing their protective information policies, indifference to audiovisual language and superfluity of newsy subjects. Otherwise they will share the responsibility of Public Service Broadcasting's marginalisation. They should start elaborating a more audience-needs oriented conception of Public Service information instead of spending their talents in moralistic condemnations of commercial television's perverse effects.

This new attitude is justified by at least two good reasons. First of all commercial and public television aren't two so completely different enterprises, especially if the Public Services' desire to preserve nation wide audiences is to be maintained without transforming into regional, educational and university channels. In this case campaigns against "spectacularisation", "bad taste" or "low quality" risk becoming boomerang activities. Secondly because people normally have a good memory and haven't forgotten the daily criticism against

state control of television. Bias in news, censorship of Current Affairs enquiries or fringe-hours programming of interesting programs have been, during the last decade, some of the main reproaches that a strong intellectual movement has made through influential press or academic publications. It would be embarrassing to explain what suddenly transformed a powerful and elitistic "monopoly" into a truly democratic, popular and innovating "Public Service".

But this paper also has a second, more theoretical aim : questioning traditional broadcasting journalism criteria. All our remarks on Public Services information policies insist on the same basic kind of limitation : a substantial lack of concern in the communication relationship with the publics supposed to be served.

If we have preferred speaking of credibility, instead of objectivity, it is because a less paternalistic attitude towards news circulation can reinforce public's confidence and fidelity to the news organizations. If we denounced the historical absence of diversity in journalistic thematic choices or the more recent boring style of television reporting, it is because broadcasting journalisms function is to raise interests, to attract recalcitrant audiences. Credibility, diversity and audiovisual investigative creativity are, briefly, the main criteria that broadcasting journalism research should adopt in evaluating future information competition.

All these criteria introduce a paradoxically neglected dimension in mass communciation research : communication. In other words,

researchers sooner or later should start dealing also with more simple but basic topics like success or failure of information programs and policies introducing an unusual parameter : quantitative and qualitative public reactions. Persisting in considering the journalistic output just as a manipulative activity is reducing all the broadcasting phenomenon to a mere "content" or "ideological" problem: as a matter of fact, it is to mistake mass communication with educational communication.

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(10) JEAN DANIEL, FRANCE CULTURE, Radio Debate, 20.9.1985

(11) French television counts many examples of these educastional big-budget documentaries like "Vive la crise" a program entirely anchored by the movie star Yves Montard or the more recent "Les 7 chocs de l'an 2000" equally presented by famous movie and TV stars.

(12) P. SERY, "La verite sur les journalistes", L'EVENEMENT DU JEUDI, 14.11.1985:101